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A French Jihādī in Crisis: “Role Exit” and Repression

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On Wednesday, February 14, 2007, at dawn, Abū Yāsīn, a man about 30 years old, father of a family, was arrested at his home in France. He was suspected of belonging to an organization that was arranging to send irregular fighters into Iraq. The arrest had been in preparation for over two months, through Franco-Belgian cooperation. The whole security operation had actually begun 24 hours earlier with the arrest in Syria of two French citizens who were accused of trying to enter Iraq illegally. Abū Yāsīn was released after three days of questioning and nine interviews in front of an officer of the court. He immediately wrote out a text detailing as precisely as possible the events that took place during his detention. This text was subsequently posted on a website, and later circulated by e-mail. His narrative allows us to gain access from the inside to the heart of representations of Salafi-Jihadist political identity, as these are diffused through the culture by means of the literature produced by this tendency, here in the early part of the 21st century. We present this text here, along with an introduction and commentary. The authenticity of this text as testimony can certainly be questioned, but the hypothesis of a put-up job is untenable. Before writing this text and releasing it, Abū Yāsīn was not unknown. He possessed credibility as an individual known to post on French-speaking jihadist websites, known personally to some other posters. He speaks often of his friends, and when he uses the expression “my brothers” this does not necessarily refer to ideological affiliation or to membership in a political network.²

Otherwise the history of Abū Yāsīn is like that of an increasing number of militants, disaffected by the actions of al-Qā’ida. For a long time, they were in agreement with jihadist preachers who denounced the two-faced quality of institutional ulama, especially Saudis, with regard to the invasion of Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq by a Western coalition. But now they have taken their distance from that tendency, which

¹ This author wishes to thank Pascal Ménoiret for his most useful comments on the first draft of the article as well as Jeffrey Lewis for his translation from French into English.

² Placed under arrest some time after Abū Yāsīn, another suspect during his arraignment began to speak of his “friends” or “co-religionists,” and the policeman writing the arrest report suggested he say “brothers”. During the repeated hearings, it became clear that the police used this word to designate members of a political network, while the detainee, Abū Yāsīn, used it in a less specific sense.

shows some signs of weakening in the society. During several interviews³ Abū Yāsīn agreed to go through the story of how he became a militant, why he did so, and why he became disenchanted and lost to some extent the idealism of his earlier days.

More generally his testimony holds interest because it explores the limits and the abuses of the French penal system in relation to the “war against terrorism”. Two reports from the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW), appearing in June 2007 and in July 2008, signaled repeated violations of human rights in connection with the struggle against terrorism in France.⁴ Among a number of recommendations made to the French government, the report’s authors underlined the necessity of reforming the “garde à vue” in which persons can be held for a short period of time without charges being filed (a magistrate is involved in extending the period).⁵ According to HRW, the French authorities used the accusation of “association with criminals in relation to a terrorist action” in an abusive way in order to hold many suspects at the end of the set period for detention without a charge, in a situation in which examining judges, not involved in an adversarial procedure (such as a jury trial) are really looking for reasons to continue holding suspects. In 2009, more than a year after the publication of the first report, the way in which the garde à vue is administered remains problematic for the French legal system, whether the matter at hand concerns terrorism or simpler infractions of the criminal code.⁶

1. Abū Yāsīn’s path to militancy and his arrest

Abū Yāsīn was born in Central Africa in the late 1970s. He was not yet four when he first set foot in France. With his mother and older brother he lived in a rundown suburban area, a “banlieue” of mostly Muslims. During his childhood and his adolescence he adopted this French Muslim culture completely, and identified with it totally. Before his formal conversion to Islam in 1995, Abū Yāsīn now thinks, he had led a completely unremarkable existence. He does not remember being subjected to racial discrimination, and is amused at the language used sometimes by Muslims themselves, when they present the newly converted of the “banlieue” as former delinquents in search of redemption. A spiritual dimension is part of the personality of Abū Yāsīn, who from the time of his conversion had a great interest in narratives of sainthood and famous ascetics. “I was as thin as a wire and I ate very little. My models were Ḥasan al-Baṣrī⁷ and

³ These interviews, recorded between December 2007 and February 2008, are the second most important source of material for the present article, in addition to the text of Abū Yāsīn.

⁴ Judith SUNDERLAND, “Au nom de la prévention,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 2007. “La justice court-circuitée: les lois et les procédures antiterroristes en France,” *Human Rights Watch*, July 2008.

⁵ During all of 2008, 577 816 persons, about 1% of the entire population of France, was placed in preliminary detention (garde à vue). Yves BORDENAVE, Isabelle MANDRAUD, Alain SALLES et Laetitia VAN ECKHOUT “La France gardée à vue,” *Le Monde*, 04/02/2009.

⁶ Maître Christian Charrière-Bournazel, bâtonnier de Paris (president of the bar association), “Garde à vue: le temps de l’arbitraire,” *Le Figaro*, 28/12/2008.

⁷ Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (642–728), a preacher from Basra known for his asceticism, participated in the conquest of Eastern Iran.

Sufyān al-Thawrī.⁸ His interest in asceticism might have led Abū Yāsīn toward Sufism;⁹ many new converts are attracted by that mystical form of Islam. But in the event it was the militants of the *Tablīgh* movement¹⁰ whom he met at his local mosque who convinced him to take part in their activities.

Abū Yāsīn was tired of the discourses of the *Tablīgh* movement before a year had gone by, and he was again concentrating on the emotion and insight that a scholarly approach to religion can produce. At first as his thinking developed he felt closer to associations that had a relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, whose local representative appeared to have more religious knowledge and a higher intellectual level than the preachers of his neighborhood. Nonetheless the overall contextualization of Islamic Scripture and texts by the lecturer Hassan Iquioussen¹¹, the intellectual Tariq Ramadan¹² or a theologian such as Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī¹³ ended up irritating Abū Yāsīn, and he separated from these associations as well. Now three years had gone by since his conversion. Abū Yāsīn had married a Muslim woman, an Algerian, and in the summer of 1998 he and his wife greeted their first child. According to him, this was a turning point in his life. A few weeks before the birth of his son, he discovered Salafism, a religious current he had not previously encountered.

Abū Yāsīn's introduction to Salafism took place in the late 1990s, when Salafi preaching was emerging on the scene in Paris-area mosques. At that time Salafi preaching in the Île-de-France area was a matter of seminars, at which Arab imams trained in the Gulf States (especially Saudi Arabia) would be invited to speak. This movement seemed strange at first, but many young people were attracted to them, and Salafism began to be a noticeable part of French Islam. During this period, French authorities rarely prevented such imams from coming to France, probably because the tendency to which they belonged was reputed to be non-interventionist, that is,

⁸ Sufyān al-Thawrī (716–778), founder of the *Tbawriya* school of legal interpretation (this is no longer extant) appears to have influenced a number of mystics.

⁹ Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and Sufyān al-Thawrī although much valued among Sufis, are also references for Salafis. Abū Yāsīn situates his Salafism in continuity with his original impulse toward asceticism, and he does not see his subsequent actions as a renunciation of that. On the distinction between asceticism and mysticism, cf. Christopher MELCHERT, “The Ḥanābila and the Early Ṣufis”, *Arabica*, n°58, 2001, p. 352–67 and “The Piety of the Ḥadīth Folk”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, n° 34, 2002, p. 425–39.

¹⁰ A missionary movement of Indo-Pakistani origin. Its French section — the “Faith and Practice” association — often organizes preaching meetings in low-income areas. Moussa KHEDIMELLAH, “Jeunes prédicateurs du mouvement Tabligh”, *Socio-Anthropologie, Religiosités contemporaines*, n° 10, 2001, p. 5–18.

¹¹ A conference lecturer, member of the UOIF, he has been sharply criticized by French Salafis because he spoke negatively about men who wear traditional dress and women who wear a full-face veil.

¹² An intellectual and university graduate of Egyptian origin, born in Switzerland in 1962. Grandson of Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906–1949), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. He has called for a radical reform of Muslim law.

¹³ Egyptian shaykh born in 1926. He has lived as a refugee in Qatar for many years; he is a member of the European council for fatwas. His reformist positions have provoked anger from many Salafi groups.

quietist¹⁴. While he had no responsibility for recruiting the youth of his neighborhood, Abū Yāsīn was frequently in attendance at these seminars, and thus came in contact with a large number of people. “I often met with brothers at the seminars with the shuyūkh. Now that I think about it, I didn’t stay with them long, but I have the feeling of having been in it for at least ten years!” However, Abū Yāsīn broke with quietist Salafism. The shock of September 11, 2001, and later the silence of Saudi ulama concerning the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, caused him to doubt many things that had once seemed certain. When the two aircrafts hit the World Trade Center towers, killing almost 3,000 people, Abū Yāsīn was at work. His spontaneous reaction was to deplore the attacks, and he was glad to see major figures in quietist Salafism react as he himself did, particularly the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Āl al-Shaykh, who a few days later signed a fatwa denouncing the terrorist attacks. Abū Yāsīn thought for a time that the American attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq would be condemned just as strongly by those same religious authorities, in whom he still had confidence. Several months later, still waiting for the Saudi ulama to make an official statement regarding the invasions, Abū Yāsīn decided to contact them personally. After a few telephone calls, he was very disappointed. “I had the feeling that my questions bothered them; they told me: the governments are being well advised (by ulama), so don’t get involved!” Abū Yāsīn found answers to his questions online. On the advice of a friend who was connected to jihadist groups, he visited the website *minbar al-tawhīd wa-l-jihād* (The forum for monotheism and jihad)¹⁵, an online library that contained the main writings of theoreticians of the jihadist tendency, above all the writings of Abū Muḥammad al-Maḥdīsī.¹⁶

Finding the writings of al-Maḥdīsī, who had denounced the “misdeeds of the Saudi state” influenced Abū Yāsīn profoundly. From that moment, none of the institutional ulama, responsible for legitimating the policies of the Kingdom, its wealth and its alliance with the United States, could be considered trustworthy. Gradually Abū Yāsīn adopted the main positions of the salafi-jihadist tendency, which held that armed struggle against “the West” and “apostate” Arab regimes was justified. “I was certain that this minhāj (path) was the truth.” The Saudi regime was considered to be a “nation of ulama” and a “nation of monotheism” by quietist Salafis. The excommunication of Saudi leaders was a major taboo, that could cause the author of the excommunication statement to be expelled forever from the ranks of quietist Salafis. The gradual separation

¹⁴ We distinguish a Salafism that is quietist and apolitical, representing a large majority of Salafists in France, and a jihadist Salafism, for which the al-Qā’ida organization remains the most mediatized expression at the international level. The quietists think they are the only legitimate Salafis, but their jihadist adversaries call them “murji’a” or “jahmiyya”, the names of two theological schools of early Islam. See *Qu’est-ce que le salafisme?* Ed. B. Rougier, Paris, PUF, 2008.

¹⁵ <http://www.tawhed.ws/>, last viewed on November 5, 2010.

¹⁶ Iṣām al-Barqāwī, better known as Abū Muḥammad al-Maḥdīsī is a jihadist ideologue, a Palestinian from Jordan. He was born in 1959 at Barqa, a village near Nablus, and he grew up in Kuwait, where his family went into exile in the mid-1960s. He took up residence in Jordan in 1992, after sojourns in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

of Abū Yāsīn from Salafi quietist discourse appears to have been provoked by the feeling of having lived through particularly tumultuous international events, events which definitely disqualified the ulama from authority. Abū Yāsīn's ideological changeover was hastened by his desire to meet people, and by the presence of some of his friends inside the jihadist movement. Membership in the group was compensated by interaction within social networks: ". . . a positive, interpersonal tie to one or more group members can function as an information bridge, increase the credibility of appeals, and intensify the pressure to accept those appeals and corresponding practices."¹⁷ Abū Yāsīn's agreement with jihadist positions remained strictly theoretical; at no point did he consider carrying out militant actions. Nonetheless his profile as a sympathizer attracted the attention of several entities involved in anti-terrorism intelligence.

In December 2006, Thomas B. and Sabri E., two French citizens from the southwestern part of the country, were arrested by the Syrian Army as they attempted to cross over into Iraq. Two months later they were deported from Damascus after having been tortured and interrogated by the Syrian secret service. On February 15, 2007, the two Frenchmen landed at Orly and were immediately arrested by agents of the SDAT (anti-terrorist bureau), the section of the French "police judiciaire" dedicated to the fight against terrorism.¹⁸ For French authorities, the simple fact of having wanted to join the Iraqi resistance was a crime, "an association with criminals in relation to terrorist actions."¹⁹ Thus investigators or the SDAT tried to find out if the friends of Thomas and Sabri had had knowledge of their plans — if, in other words, there was an organization funneling fighters from France to Iraq.

The investigation led them to the Toulouse area, to the Ile-de-France and to the banlieue areas around Brussels, where most of the friends of the two suspects lived. More than 20 people were detained; the Belgians were released, but among the French, only Abū Yāsīn escaped jail. After 72 hours in detention and nine interrogation sessions, he was placed in the clear. Happy to be free, he wanted to share his experiences, and also to correct some of the representations his friends had of the French anti-terrorist services, normally imagined by jihadists to be torturers without ethical principles.

¹⁷ David SNOW et Richard MACHALECK, "The Sociology of Conversion", *Annual Review of Sociology*, n° 10, 1984, p. 167–190, see p. 183.

¹⁸ Having been called the *6th Central Division of the Judicial Police* (6^e DCPJ) and then the *National Anti-Terrorist Division* (DNAT), this agency was directed by Roger Marion for a long time. He had drawn criticism before with regard to methods of both interrogation and investigation, particularly with regard to the LDH and the FIDH. Olivia RECASENS, Jean-Michel DECUGIS, Christophe LABBE, *Place Beauveau: la face cachée de la police*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2006. It should be noted that the investigative team that arrested Abū Yāsīn was the subject of a televised report produced by the on air magazine *Sept à Huit*, which ran on TF1 on March 30, 2008.

¹⁹ During the last century, French authorities have sometimes closed their eyes with regard to international mobilizations considered in a different light, such as the formation of international brigades during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the action of militants of the extreme right in support of Maronite Christians during the war in Lebanon (1975–1990).

The story of Abū Yāsīn is thus not about a victim. It may not be able to claim objectivity, but at least it can claim to be honest. Written less than 48 hours after he was released from detention, it was posted on an online forum²⁰ and later circulated as an e-mail. The document concisely tells what happened while he was in detention, and also described his arrest, which was followed by an official search of his home.

2. Abū Yāsīn's testimony

“Boom Boom Boom!”

It was ten to six in the morning; my brother was still in front of his computer surfing the Internet, and I was stretched out on the sofa asleep.

A deafening sound woke me a little but I was still sleepy. My brother got up, furious, and headed for the door, thinking that the people on the other side were drunk and playing a joke.

I knew right away that it could only be the police. Fortunately my brother opened the door quickly, and they did not try to kick it in.

Several of them came in, including a tall thin man with an egg shaped head who came towards me and asked me if I was Mr. so-and-so. I said that I was and he put me in handcuffs.

Another man came toward me and asked me if I knew why they were there. After a few seconds' thought (I was still half asleep), I answered him saying, of course not. He hit me with this enormous accusation: “association with criminals in relation to a terrorist action”.

The phrase bounced around inside my head for a while — what is this, some kind of joke?

The agents searched the entire house and took several things in which they were visibly interested. They didn't understand Arabic so they asked a Maghreban agent named Mouloud to translate for them and show them what they needed to take.

They turned the whole house upside down. There were at least eight or nine of them, their faces visible, except for one, masked, who seemed strangely enough to resemble my very good friend Idris; I had a good feeling for him because he looked like Idris even though he was wearing a mask. I guess that this was the man who had been following me and tracing me. At one point, he winked at me; could it actually be Idris, could he have another life that he had concealed from me? Impossible, he is a real *muwāḥḥid*²¹ by the grace of God.

Another agent, Fred, picked up some keys off the buffet and asked me what car they belonged to. The man in the mask answered, “the 4x4.”

When they asked me if I had changed the plates on the car, he answered again; I wasn't sure. Among the men there was a frail looking blonde lady who called herself

²⁰ The French language website Anṣār al-Ḥaqq, <http://ansar-alhaqq.net/>, the narrative of Abū Yāsīn can be accessed here: <http://ansar-alhaqq.net/forum/showthread.php?t=195>, last viewed November 5, 2010.

²¹ Monotheist. A name adopted by the disciples of Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wāḥḥāb (1703–1792), a reformer from Central Arabia.

Audrey. One agent with the head of a Corsican²² and a deep voice asked me to show them the basement. I went there with three men, they could see that there was nothing but carpet, old clothes, and boxes, nothing of any importance. We all went back upstairs into my house and then Fred asked me if I was hiding Osama in my basement. This joke did not make me laugh because I was still tired. I was going to say to him that Osama generally prefers to fly through the air, but I held back on this.

The man in the mask reminded him that this was no time for jokes. The house had been searched; they filled two sacks with the things they were taking, let my brother go, and took me with them.

We waited for a few minutes in the hall while they brought up the cars. A neighbor passed in front of us and waved at us. I kept my head high and proud because despite the handcuffs I was powerful because I am Muslim.

We got in the car; there was a convoy of three or four cars with their rotating lights on. We speeded toward Paris, passing all the other cars.

I began to realize what was happening to me, and I started to pass from the condition of a spectator to that of an actor.

Finally we arrived in front of the big building for the Ministry of the Interior, anti-terrorism section. They sat me down in a chair and handcuffed one of my hands to it. Audrey began asking me questions. She wanted to know everything about my life from college up to the present day. She asked so many questions that it's a wonder I didn't end up explaining to her why my fifth year professor was named Fred and not Frédéric.

A young black man walked into the room and called me by my first name; he wasn't in my house — was I so well known to these policemen?

After three hours of questions, I asked to be allowed to go to the bathroom to do my ritual cleansing. A Maghreban, another one, asked me if I needed the times for prayers. I told him no, and then I said my prayers, in tranquility, in front of my three interrogators, the young blonde woman who admitted that she did not know my dossier very well, Fred, and Mouloud, who was built like a brick wall.

First interrogation with Audrey

- What are you charging me with? What am I doing here?
- You will know soon, it's about your relationships with certain persons, we have some things on you. Do you know that so-and-so and so-and-so got arrested in Syria?
- This is the first I've heard of it.
- Well, that's why you are here!
- Two people got arrested in Syria and you come looking for me?
- Yes, and pretty soon you will know why.

²² The people Abū Yāsīn encounters are often described in terms of ethnic appearance, as if this justified their function. The policeman with the "head of a Corsican," oddly enough, represents a repressive force, but the investigator who is of Maghreban origin is described as a "Bougnoule de service."

The questions continued until my life looked like a tabletop spread out in front of their eyes. From the top of the mountain they looked down, scrutinizing the smallest details.

At around three o'clock in the afternoon, Mouloud brought me something to eat, a plate of Mediterranean rice with chicken fat. I didn't want any. First, it was not halal, and second, I felt like feeling pain, suffering for my religion. Maybe I also wanted to lose a little weight. So I refused the rice, and the hours went by, and the questions continued, and night fell again over Paris, and then they took me before a judge who had come to see us in their offices.

- I know the answer, but I have to ask you this question: "Are you suffering at this time because you have taken any drugs?"
- No, sir!
- I am aware that you are being interrogated, and for the moment, everything is going alright, continue like that. You have a job and you have children, think about them, it is in your interest to get out of here as soon as possible.
- I should say!

I went out, still handcuffed, and they took me back to the police station. The car was going very fast toward the place de la Concorde, and then toward the docks, I love to look at Paris and its beautiful monuments when they are all illuminated at night, its buildings with golden rooftops, one must admit that it is a beautiful city, especially at night. We arrived at the station, it's a grim place, a big place with an immense blue steel door. I go in and I see a number of people, street trash as some call them, they talk loudly and brag about the fact that are going to spend four months at Fleury, they need to know, right now, where is the bus?

Among them there was a black man asking for something to eat and tapping on a window, there were several policemen there, including a Maghreban woman, who walked over to the hungry black man and said to him, articulating each word, "Have the decency to ask correctly, my dear sir!"

Then she walked over towards me and the two policemen who were with me asked her to give me something to eat, explaining that I was a Muslim, she offered me the same dish as before, with the chicken fat, all while looking at me, intrigued, because she wanted to see if I would refuse the plate.

- Are you not going to eat anything, sir?
- It's not a problem, I'm not hungry.

I got to the place where they search people and the policeman there asked me why I was there, I almost answered him "Because I am a Muslim," but I chickened out and promised myself to say it if someone asked me the same question again. After being searched, I had to follow a lady took me back to my cell, most of the women policeman are pretty muscular, not fat but women who eat well and who are chosen for their ability to hit people.

My first night in a cell — a blue cell, with a toilet and a little sink, a slab for a bed with a mattress on it.

I thought about the Qur'an and I recited the few verses that I know by heart. I tried to do a few chants also. The Qur'an is very beautiful in moments like that, you feel the force of it, the weight of the verses talking about our suffering and our solitude. Unfortunately I don't know that many verses.

I could not sleep, I was thinking about a lot of things, a lot of people, my family, my brothers.

At first I laid on the floor, perhaps in order to make things a little harder on myself, but it was too cold and so I laid down on the bed.

I didn't dare rest my head on the mattress, I thought it must have fleas, so I laid my head down on my overcoat. I finally got to sleep and then woke up at six o'clock, the time of the *salāt*. I said my prayers in a loud voice to show that I was still proud and still holding my head up despite being in jail.

In the door there was some kind of little porthole, a woman opened it and gave me two cookies and a little carton of orange juice.

At 9 a.m. they came looking for me. Audrey asked me:

- Did you eat last night?
- No, but I ate some breakfast this morning, so it's all right.

We went back to the headquarters for a second day of questioning, now they wanted to know more about my religion and some of my friendships. Mouloud began the questioning:

- What obedience are you?
- Sunni.
- But are you *salafī*, *tablīghī*,²³ *takfīrī*?²⁴
- No, Sunni, the term Salafī is not bad, but in my opinion it is useless to create one more division in the *Umma*, Allah called us "Muslims," and so I am a Muslim. You can add Sunni if you like.
- What are the groups that you know?
- I know the Salafis, the Ikhwān,²⁵ the Tablīgh.
- What do you think about Islam in France, and the vision that the Westerners have of Islam?
- They don't understand, because they are ignorant.
- Do you think that you are represented by Islamic institutions in France?
- Not at all.
- What do you think about Arab governments who do not govern according to the *Sbaria*?
- They are apostate.

²³ That is, a militant of the *Tablīgh* movement.

²⁴ "Excommunicator". The term is often used to indicate recourse to excommunication that occurs too frequently, or in a way that is too hasty or too facile, especially when applied to fellow Muslims.

²⁵ The Muslim Brotherhood.

- Talk to us about jihād.
- It is an effort to control yourself, to struggle against evil and the temptation to sin. It can also be a struggle against States that invade Muslim countries, massacring and terrorizing the population. In that case, it's our duty to help that population.
- How far will you help them?
- Armed struggle and combat.
- So you support an armed struggle?
- Did they blame the foreigner who in 1942 came to help France struggle against Germany?
- Who are your references, who do you read?
- 'Alwān²⁶, Khudāy²⁷, Maqdisī, 'Uqlā²⁸, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, Ibn Taymiyya and I also read al-'Uthaymīn.²⁹
- Me, I like Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab but not Ibn Taymiyya because he's the one who put all the politics in religion³⁰; what do you think about Ibn Taymiyya?
- He is a legal expert, a very wise man. I like Ibn Taymiyya.
- Are you anti-Sunni?

At that point, I admitted I didn't understand the question. The policeman repeated it three times, and so then I said to him:

- Do you maybe mean anti-Shiite?
- No, pardon me, I mean anti-Semite.
- Not at all.
- What do you think about the war in Iraq?
- No foreign meddling in Iraq, the Americans must leave that country.

He handed me a statement written by one of the brothers who was being interrogated in another room.

- What do you think about that? He's talking about dying as a martyr, isn't he?
- Such a last will is normal, it's a good idea to make one under Islam. And this is not the kind of statement somebody writes before doing some kind of action. The proof is: he's talking about having his body washed, but they don't wash the bodies of people who die in combat.
- That's right, Mouloud admitted; did you know that some people give the zakat to fighters for the jihad?
- No, I didn't know that.
- Oh yeah, some people do it, you know it's like the taxes we pay, some of that goes for that too. Did you know that Syria is a good place to go if you want to go make the jihad in Iraq?

²⁶ Sulaymān Ibn Nāṣir al-'Alwān, born in 1970 in Burayda, Saudi Arabia, shaykh of the jihadist tendency.

²⁷ 'Alī Ibn Khudāy al-Khudāy, born in Riyadh in 1955, active doctrinal support for al-Qā'ida.

²⁸ Ḥammūd Ibn 'Uqlā al-Shu'aybī, born in 1927 in Saudi Arabia, shaykh who publicly approved of the attacks of September 11.

²⁹ Muḥammad Ibn Ṣāliḥ Ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-'Uthaymīn (1925–2001), leading Saudi Salafi ulama.

³⁰ The Maghrebain investigator is presenting a journalistic cliché, that holds that the medieval theologian from Damascus, Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) is the “father of radical Islam”. He may be a source of dogmatism for radical movements, but he is also a very important reference for their main opponents.

- The media say that, I know.
- And Egypt?
- Who goes to Egypt³¹ in order to get to Iraq?
- If you see somebody in Egypt who tells you that he wants to go to Iraq, what do you tell him?
- That he's an idiot, he might as well head for Moscow by way of New York!

That made Audrey laugh and Mouloud said: "Maybe he thought he could dig a tunnel!" At one point, Mouloud showed me some photos, asking me if I recognized the people, I did recognize one brother and I said to him:

- That's Mr. A. . . , we call him the chemist.

He looked at me, stunned, and said:

- What?
- No, no, I'm kidding!

He smiled and said to me:

- Be careful what you say, because otherwise we're going to go get that guy right now.

While marching down the corridors, I saw a few brothers, their faces tired or sad. Then they interrogated me about papers they had taken from my house, a sister had written the "*sa-nakhbūdu*" chant in Arabic³², Fred showed me a partial translation that Mouloud had made, I quibbled with his translation of one word, and he noted it: "He disagrees with the translation of this word." I explained to them that it was a chant that the brothers liked very much. It's really beautiful, this chant. I wanted to take the translation and finish it later.

After that he got me to read a text written by a brother that was critical of the State of Israel and he asked me:

- Do you think that this State is racist and criminal?
- I think that the Zionists are racists and criminals, but not the State and not all those who live there.
- What do you think about the conflict between Israel and the Arabs?
- I am against throwing the Jews into the sea, I want them to live in peace with the Arabs, but I want them to give the Muslims of Palestine the land that they had before 1948.

Then Audrey asked me some questions about several of the brothers. She showed me photos of Belgians and asked me to point out the ones I knew. I pointed out three brothers.

- This brother, when did you see him and why? What did you talk about? What tendency does he follow? Did you see his wife and his children at his house?

³¹ Although he himself was living and working in France, Abū Yāsīn's wife and children were in Egypt. Often visiting them in Cairo, Abū Yāsīn had sent his family there years before so they could live in an Islamic environment and get an education consistent with his Islamic ethics.

³² The chant is "*sa-nakhbūdu mā'ārika-nā mā'abum*" (We will join the battle against them). Cf. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WskSS6N5DeE&feature=related>, last viewed November 5, 2010.

- I saw him at such and such a time. He is a Sunni. I did not see his wife.
- He refused to let his wife see you when you were at his house?
- No, I did not say that, but we don't do things that way; I come to talk to the husband, not to his wife.
- What should I write, then? That he refused to let his wife come in?
- No, all you have to do is to write: "He did not see his wife because she did not come into the room."
- Did you talk about jihad with him?
- No, we talked about everything, about life, about society; you know, our religion takes in everything.
- This brother, how long have you known him? What did you talk to him about, did you talk to him about jihad?
- I don't remember if we talked about jihad, we talked about a lot of things, you know.
- Mr. so-and-so, who is well acquainted with the Belgian brothers, did he talk to you about so-and-so or so-and-so?
- No, never.
- But you must know them, don't you?
- Why is that?
- These were his childhood friends, he must have talked to you about them!
- Do you know the childhood friends of your coworker over there?
- I'm asking the questions!

She asked the same questions about some other brothers. At one point I said to her,

- The next time I meet one of my brothers, I'll note the date and the subject of discussion, that will make things easier for you.
- This brother, what did you talk about with him?
- With him? We talk about women.
- Women?
- Yes, women.

Another agent chimed in: "Ah, the ladies!"

She wrote down: "With So-and-So, they talked about women."

- Did you talk about jihad with this other one?
- You need to know that jihad is not a subject about which we disagree, we don't spend all our time arguing about it.

The Corsican interrupted:

- So, you all are in agreement about it, it's settled, huh.
- Yes, that's right.

Then Audrey said:

- You speak to someone named Arbi, who is that?
- I don't know anybody named Arbi.
- Come on, we have tapes of you talking and you talk quite often about Arbi, who is he?

I thought about it but I could not figure who Arbi was. Suddenly I laughed and said:

— Ah ok, it's not Arbi, it's "*akbī*," that is "my brother" in Arabic.

Interrogation with Fred

- We found a text at your place, and the translation says democracy is a misdeed, what do you say about that?
- I say the same thing as the text. It is a misdoing and it is contrary to Islam.
- And secularism?
- Same thing.
- What do you think about the prohibition on wearing the veil at school?
- That's wrong, why prohibit a woman from wearing a veil? As long as she wants to wear it herself, I don't understand why her veil would stop a class from being conducted.

Fred would say to me later, "You are really zen, I'm like that too in difficult situations."

- What do you think about suicide bombers?
- I disagree with some of the brothers about that, let's say that I condemn that.
- What do you think about attacks, in general?
- If they hit military targets, armies that invade Muslim countries, I see no problem.
- So, you might be happy about that?
- Yes.

He brought me some things I had written and asked me if I wasn't using those writings to incite people to go to war.

- No, I'm just communicating historical facts.
- But somebody might read it and decide to go into combat . . .
- Maybe, yes.
- Do you condemn the fact that So-and-So went to Iraq?
- It's his life, he does what he wants, he didn't ask my advice.
- Do you condemn him or not?
- No.
- So what do you think about jihad?
- I have already answered this several times. I say what the Qur'an says about it.
- But what is your interpretation of the Qur'an?
- I'm not able to interpret it, I read expert commentaries. If you want me to condemn the Qur'an, I'd rather die than do that. Why don't you make it illegal in France?
- Nobody is asking you to condemn the Qur'an, and we're not going to make it illegal . . . How many Muslims are there in the world?
- Statistics say, more than a billion.
- And how many of them think like you?
- Not many, I guess.
- So, look here, who told you you are right about everything? We're not taking it away from you or people who think like you.
- Actually, you don't have anything on me. You want to put me in jail for what I believe?
- We don't put people in prison for what they believe, unless the things they believe lead to serious things.

- In the country of the Enlightenment, you put somebody in jail for what they believe? Voltaire is turning over in his grave!
- No, but you're not honest, you're hiding what you believe. Here we interrogate people who speak clearly and they're not in jail; so, don't be afraid to say what you think.

Audrey came back and insisted I eat something, she brought me a sandwich made with halal turkey, I wanted to try to convert her, by the *da'wa*³³ . . . maybe one day she would invite me to her *walīma*³⁴ with a pious brother, if God wills (in shā Allāh).

Then they showed me photos of my children and my family. I had tears in my eyes, I was emotional, looking at my daughters. I threw the packet of photos to the ground.

- Why show me pictures of my daughters? Are they part of the case?
- What are you upset about? We just want to know who is who, your daughters are very young, but they already wear veils. Is that a sign of radical Islamism according to you?
- First you have to define your terms. For me it is just a sign that we are Muslims.

At one o'clock they drove me back to a place that was like the depot, the "CP".³⁵ A lady came to see me at the door of my cell:

- Do you want to eat?
- No, I want to pray, and I would like to be able to do my ablutions.

She paid no attention to my repeated requests and left. The police came back to see me at 3 p.m. and asked me if I had eaten and prayed, I told them they had not let me go to the bathroom. An old policeman from downtown acted surprised and said that he had come on duty at 2 p.m. and I hadn't asked him for anything, even though he walked past me several times. Actually I thought he had been there much longer and I didn't want to get humiliated again by getting silence as a response. At the headquarters I said my prayers and then they interrogated me until the evening fell. Mouloud laughed and told me:

- You know, the other officers made fun of me for a long time because of you.
- Why?
- One day we were listening in, and you said, talking about me, "He's the designated Arab" ("C'est le bougnoule de service").³⁶
- I remember the discussion but it's not my style to say such a thing, I think it must have been the person I was speaking with who said those words.
- Who is "the noble shaykh R . . ."?

I laughed at that and told him,

- Well, that's David, I say those things on the phone, noble brother, great shaykh, great *mujāhid*, we're kidding . . .

³³ Religious proselytizing.

³⁴ Wedding meal.

³⁵ Probably « Centre Pénitentiaire ».

³⁶ The telephone conversation was private, and Abū Yāsīn was describing his experience in detention to one of his friends, just after having been interrogated by Mouloud.

He laughed and said,

- You know, they bring me tapes and I'm supposed to ask you questions, like why is one guy named the Indian Spaniard?

There I burst out laughing and told him that was two different people.

- I thought that was funny, he has to be either Indian or Spanish!

After that they took us all to court, to see if the judge would extend the detention period, they got their masks ready because there would be a welcoming committee of journalists. I asked them:

- Who is the most dangerous among us?
- You are.
- And why me, and not the guy you say is a reference the young people look to?
- No, it's you, and the worst part is that you don't realize it, you better watch what you say.
- That's funny, because the brothers that criticize us say we are just big talkers and we'll never go fight anywhere, but you think I would!
- We know guys like you won't go into combat because you are an ideologue, but because of you people who have nothing to lose would go be fighters.

Now it was time to go see the judge, the rumor was going around that there might be journalists waiting when we leave the Ministry, or even at court. Audrey asked me,

- You want to be seen on television?
- No, not really.
- Do you want to put my mask on, or do you want us to cover your head with your coat?
- I prefer your mask.

She smiled and said,

- But I only have one.
- Well, you asked me to choose, I'm just answering you!

There were six of us brothers, each in a car with three agents, rotating signal lights flashing. We sped toward the court, a convoy of six cars — I like to watch TV shows called “Bring in the accused,” “Forbidden Zone” and “Exclusive Investigation,” and I was now an actor and people were looking at me, there was even a Parisian waving his arms to the sound of the sirens.

We got to the court building and by the grace of Allāh there was no pack of reporters, I saw the six brothers, including one who had been arrested in Syria. We were all tired, faces grim with resignation, but he was smiling, his face like a full moon, proud to be a believer, free in his faith despite the handcuffs on his wrists. Twice he smiled at me. May Allāh be merciful to you, brother!

Each of us went before the judge while one of the brothers talked about cooking with the policemen. The judge asked me:

- Detention going OK?

- Very well, Madam!
- The police have some more questions to ask you, so I am going to extend your detention by 48 hours.

When we were getting out of the car, Mouloud told me I should have told the judge about the bad treatment I had received at the CP when they wouldn't let me go to the bathroom or pray. We went back to the CP where I spent my second night in jail, I preferred that to the holding cell because there's no search and there are a lot fewer people around.

At 10 a.m. they came again to take me to headquarters. Another day of questions. They said that the dossier would be decided on tonight, either release or charges filed. They kept asking me questions about my religion and my relationships. I began to get tired of the questions and I told them so.

Fred said to me: "If I don't ask you these questions, the judge will tell me I'm worthless and I need to get another job."

- What websites do you regularly visit?
- Um, *lemonde.fr* . . .
- No, I mean religious websites.
- You ask me what website I go to regularly, I tell you.
- OK, give me all of them, then.
- *Lemonde.fr*, *Ribaate.org*³⁷, *tawhed.ws*³⁸, *alfaseeh.com*³⁹, *muslm.net*.⁴⁰

Audrey asked me if I wanted to eat, I explained to her that in such a situation I had no appetite. I asked her if we would be allowed to take books of religion into prison, and she said yes.

Then I asked Mouloud if he could get me the *Asīr* (prisoner) chant when I got to prison.

- *Asīr*?
- Yes: "*asīrun fī gḥayābībim asīr, asīrun fī sujūnībim ḥaqīr*" (A prisoner in their secluded hideaways, A prisoner. A prisoner in their prisons ; a prisoner)⁴¹
- Yes, no problem, I've already done that for another person.

It was getting dark, I went to do my ablutions, this time Mouloud led me without handcuffs, I made my Maghreb prayer by reciting these verses: "Be sure we shall test you

³⁷ French language website of al-Mourabitoune, <http://www.ribaate.org> (not accessible on November 5, 2010).

³⁸ The site Minbar al-Tawḥīd wa-l-Jihād (www.tawhed.ws) is an important jihadist library online, last viewed on November 5, 2010.

³⁹ A forum for the discussion of the Arabic language: <http://www.alfaseeh.com/vb/index.php>. This site was not accessible on November 5, 2010.

⁴⁰ Arabic language forum, a favorite for jihadists, <http://www.muslm.net/vb/index.php>, last viewed on November 5, 2010.

⁴¹ Aseer (prisoner) — Abu Ali on: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXBtTZDntU&feature=related>, last viewed on November 5, 2010.

with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere, Who say, when afflicted with calamity: "To Allah we belong, and to Him is our return."⁴²

Now it was 11 o'clock, in another hour we would again see the judge who would decide if I was going to jail or not. They had interrogated me nine times and I was tired.

Mouloud tried to focus my attention; he explained that he was going to interrogate me one more time because there were still some doubts about my role. This last session of questioning could be the one that would get me released. I began to feel sad, thinking of my family. He talked to me about my children, which made me emotional. I thought about my daughters. I did not want to be separated from them. How do people do it, who are put in jail for years? How do people go on, with a parent that disappears for years, those who have had a parent taken by the police, and nobody knows if he's alive or dead? Some people have to go through terrible trials. Mine was nothing in comparison.

Fred told me the judge was not going to like my answers. He said,

— You're going in the hole, you'll end up at the Santé.

Other policemen came in and acted surprised to see me still there:

— He hasn't gone to jail yet, this one?

— No, his case is particularly complex, the judge is puzzled.

Audrey said to me:

— Don't believe it about you going to prison, not everybody who comes through here goes to prison.

— But I know I'm going to be sent to prison.

"No you won't," said Mouloud.

At 11:30 a man came in, someone I had seen in the corridors but who had never spoken to me, he stood in front of me and said:

— Listen, I'm the one running this whole business, all the other cases are clear, the judge has given her OK for that, the only problem is you. So-and-So said you knew about their plans to go to Iraq, and the others said the same thing.

— I already said several times that I did not know what they were planning, I thought one was going to Cairo and the other was getting married.

— You want the judge to believe that they're all lying and you're telling the truth? Why would So-and-So, who knows he's going to prison, say you knew about everything if it wasn't true? He decided to tell us everything, so admit you knew.

I said to myself, this is a bluff, it's the last attempt to make the poor innocent guy crack, I've seen this scene a thousand times in the movies. First, it's not true, I didn't know what they were planning to do, and then, even if I had known, why would the brother who knew he was going to jail want to drag me along with him?

⁴² Qur'an, al-Baqara — 2: 155–156.

- We've warned you, you still say you knew nothing?
- I'm not going to lie to satisfy you, if you want to put me in prison for that, then I am still going to tell the truth and I'll go to prison for that, but I refuse to lie.

Then I launched into a speech, about 7–10 minutes. At the end he said,

- You've got your spiel down pretty good, too bad for you, you'll see tonight in front of the judge.

He left and Mouloud clapped me on the shoulder. Fred got my belongings ready and talked about the *dépôt*. Audrey sighed, she was glad it was the last day, with ten hours of questions a day I was tired too. I had been wearing the same clothes for three days and I hadn't taken a shower.

They left the room and left me alone. I began to go to sleep, resigned to the idea that I would be going to prison. I was telling myself that at last I would have free time to study. Another 15 minutes, and the door opened and Fred said:

- Come on, get up, you're free to go, you can go home.
- Free? You mean we're going to see the judge or . . .
- No, free to go home, the judge decided, come on, hurry, it's late.

3. Someone disillusioned with al-Qā'ida?

When asked the question by members of the regional press, an investigator said that Abū Yāsīn had been released because there was no evidence linking him to the alleged crimes.⁴³ In other words, he was exonerated and no legal proceedings ensued. The final chapter of the incident took place on July 10, 2009 before the 14th division of the correctional court of Paris. Sentences ranging from 6 months to 6 years without parole were handed out; Thomas B. and Sabri E. were sentenced to 5 years in prison with one year suspended, and they were ordered to complete a week-long citizenship training course. As for Abū Yāsīn, he had taken his distance from the jihadist tendency a year earlier, and now was counted among the many who have become disillusioned with regard to al-Qā'ida.

Abū Yāsīn gradually rejected the justifiability of the actions carried out by al-Qā'ida, and then the legitimacy of the organization itself. Before realizing the truth of this, he had already asked himself questions about the justifiability of some of the operations carried out by jihadists, especially suicide bombers. "You know, at bottom I always had my doubts about the suicide bombers." This beginning of critical reflection corresponds to a process model of dis-engagement, or "role exit".⁴⁴ When I asked Abū Yāsīn what started that process for him, what started things going in that direction, he mentioned the letter that al-Maqdisī had sent to Zarqāwī as the first step in stepping back. In that document, published in 2005 and titled *Munāṣara wa munāṣaha: āmāl wa ālām* (Help

⁴³ Vincent PIALAT, *La Dépêche du Midi*, 18/02/2007.

⁴⁴ Helene Rose Fuchs EBAUGH, *Becoming and Ex.The Process of Role Exit*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1988. Also see *Le désengagement militant*, ed. Olivier FILLIEULE, Paris, Belin, 2005.

and advice: hopes and pains)⁴⁵, al-Maḳdisī warned his old friend against allowing too many suicide bombings in Iraq, pleading with him not to target Shi'ite or Christian civilians, or their places of worship. The answer that Zarqāwī had sent did not persuade him, and Abū Yāsīn's doubts became even stronger. This situation corresponds to the culmination of the first part of the process of role exiting described by Helen Rose Fuchs-Ebaugh: the search for individuals who can amplify one's doubts.

Abū Yāsīn's changes of position can certainly be explained for reasons he himself does not give, such as growing maturity, or a gradual realization that the jihadist project was impractical. One could also wonder about the effect of detention on the development of his thinking. Did that experience strengthen his doubts, and lead him to reconsider his support for jihadist positions? Through analysis of the data collected during our interviews with Abū Yāsīn, to which were added statements by persons close to him, we have concluded that there was no particular change in his position, which came about in the months following his detention. Only his representation of the anti-terrorist police seemed to change. He was surprised at not having met with "torturers devoid of moral principles," surprised to find out that the police were human beings.⁴⁶ Indeed this seems to be the main reason he took the trouble to write out a description of his experience. As far as we know, this is the only notable event in this connection that has occurred since he was originally placed in temporary detention and questioned.

Nine months later, at the end of 2007, Abū Yāsīn reached the second phase of role exit. He made a conscious verbalization of his own doubts, basing himself on the writings of al-Maḳdisī, and also on *murāja'āt* (revisions) made by the Egyptian Sayyid Imām,⁴⁷ first published in November 2007. Going much further than al-Maḳdisī, Sayyid Imām takes a clear position, explicitly condemning the leadership of al-Qā'ida, particularly his old companion al-Zawāhirī.⁴⁸ Having reached the final stage of role exit, the point at which one looks back at one's course, and announces the change to others, Abū Yāsīn translated several passages from the work of Sayyid Imām, and he decided to publish these in January 2008 on a number of French language jihadist forums. He was quickly censured by the moderators, who refused to debate the legitimacy of actions for which al-Qā'ida claimed responsibility. He understands that he faces what amounts to sectarian opposition in favor of the terrorist organization, and this frustrates him to some extent.

⁴⁵ <http://www.tawhed.ws/?i=dtwiam56>, last viewed on November 5, 2010.

⁴⁶ According to Abū Yāsīn, this expression (in the end they are "human beings") was in fact used by one of his friends when he was released from detention, in relation to another case of terrorism.

⁴⁷ Amel LAMNAOUER and Romain CAILLET, "De l'usage du jihād: la fin d'une ère en Egypte? Les révisions idéologiques de Sayyid Imām," *L'Égypte dans l'année 2007*, eds. Hadjar AOUARDJI and Hélène LEGAY, Cairo, CEDEJ, 2008, p. 85–115. See the biography of Sayyid Imām, better known by the pen name of 'Abd al-Qādir Ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, or under the name of Doctor Faḍl, *Ibid.*, p. 86–90.

⁴⁸ For the reasons behind the resentment felt by Sayyid Imām toward Aymān al-Zawāhirī, see *Ibid.*, p. 94–95.

“What I can’t stand is, these unconditional supporters of al-Qā’ida can’t tolerate the least criticism.”

Abū Yāsīn began a thread for which the topic was the *amān* (guarantee of safe conduct).⁴⁹ Abū Yāsīn maintained that the modern equivalent of the classical *amān* is to obtain a resident or tourist visa. Therefore it is both illegal and treacherous for a Muslim who has accepted being welcomed onto the soil of a foreign country, and who has accepted protection under its legal system, to attack that country’s interests. This position was considered treasonous itself by most commenters, and soon Abū Yāsīn found himself banned from the website.

At the end of this process of distancing, Abū Yāsīn now has to face the social consequences of his change of heart, and is now in the post-exit phase of role exit. As Jean-Paul Sartre once said, such a change always means the ending of some friendships. “It is not easy to quit a party. There is a law, that one must tear out of oneself in order to break it, there are men whose loved and familiar faces will become the ugly faces of enemies, there is a dark crowd that will continue to march, obstinately, and that one sees disappearing in the distance.”⁵⁰ As we close the present writing it is too early to evaluate the success of the process of total de-identification that Abū Yāsīn is going through with respect to the jihadist tendency. His willingness to separate from the French-speaking apologists for al-Qā’ida, which he never had a high opinion of, appears irrevocable. Nonetheless it is likely that he will continue to have respect for some of the religious references connected with the ideological field of the *salafīyya jibādiyya*. Are these the last vestiges of a youth spent beneath the virtual swords of the jihadist web?

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⁴⁹ The *amān* is a technical term in Muslim law, used most often in the Classical period to refer to a “safe conduct” given to a foreigner, a merchant or a diplomat who wished to traverse a Muslim country (*Dār al-Islām*), although he himself came from a land of unbelief (*Dār al-Kufr*). By extension the safe conduct given to a Muslim by infidels is also termed *amān* in Islamic jurisprudence.

⁵⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, preface to *Aden Arabie* by Paul Nizan. Cited by Catherine Leclerc, “Raison de sortir”. Les militants du Parti communiste français”, in *Le désengagement militant*, ed. Olivier FILLIEULE, Paris, Belin, 2005, p. 131.

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